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IRISH COMMUNICATIONS REVIEW

REVIEWS

QUALITY ASSESSMENT OF TELEVISION

Sakae Ishikawa (editor), London: John Libby Media, University of Luton Press, 1996. 309pp, stg£25, ISBN 1 86020 5070

Reviewed by: *Adrian Moynes*

If we want to look forward to good television in the years to come, then we need clear thinking about standards of value and how to secure them. As a contribution to the debate in Ireland and other countries about the future of broadcasting, this book is timely, comprehensive and occasionally exasperating.

The twelve papers offered here amount to a progress report on international research which began in 1990 under the sponsorship of Japan's NHK Broadcasting Culture Research Institute. They are presented in three sections: one surveys research into quality assessment in Canada, Japan, the UK and the Nordic countries; one looks at quality from the perspectives of broadcasting professionals and the public; and the final section, entitled 'Public Service idea and diversity in assessing television quality', comprises research, experience and arguments from around the world.

For its bibliographies, its statistical tables, its cosmopolitan approach, its critiques and comparisons of research methods, this is an invaluable collection.

The researchers share the aim of establishing a yardstick of quality in broadcasting - a daunting enterprise given the diverse systems of broadcasting in myriad cultures on the planet, and one which has produced some dauntingly difficult reading. It's a pity that some of the least engaging prose in this book is to be found in chapter one.

Persevere: this is ultimately a rewarding survey of a quarter century of Nordic research and it draws the conclusion that quality is best understood when 'assessed against standards anchored in values and norms'. This relational concept of quality is fundamental to research approaches described throughout this volume and it is offered - with modest understatement - to the international media research community as 'something of value'.

Something else of value is the book's achievement as a ground-clearing exercise.

The contributors test research methods and seek out clarity of definition and discrimination. There cannot be a single criterion or consideration of quality that is ignored or unexamined in these papers. In part, this very comprehensiveness accounts for some of the frustration experienced by this reader. There are times when it seems that the mountain has laboured to bring forth a mouse. Almost thirty pages and twelve tables are devoted to 'Measuring diversity in US television programming: New evidence'. The result is a conclusion of staggering banality:

In the United States, the unique combination of commercial broadcast television, public television, cable, premium pay and pay per view make for a smorgasbord assortment of programming (both greater depth and breadth), even if it is tilted towards some popular categories. With an adequate amount of discretionary time and income, the American consumer can access this vast array of programming, not all of which is represented in this study, and employ telecommunication devices such as VCRs (or visit video stores) to

obtain as much diversity as desired...

Now who'd have imagined that? To be fair, the same chapter has an appendix containing a useful insight into the deficiencies of various approaches to categorising programmes. It is a consolation to anyone who has wrestled with what is an especially difficult and pressing problem for broadcasters as well as for researchers. With a background in production and programming, I particularly enjoyed the papers in section two in which writers, producers and broadcasters teased out such questions as the nuances of what makes a serious programme. If viewers associate quality with 'seriousness' in programmes, what is meant by 'seriousness'? Put like that, it sounds high-minded and Victorian in a Matthew Arnold sort of way, but the comments reported here make for a lively and an enlightening debate among some of the most creative English-speaking programme-makers on both sides of the Atlantic. While the book is a gathering of research reports, this section whets an appetite for more polemic and dialectic about such fundamental concepts as public service broadcasting, diversity, production values, etc..

'Quality is important. But if no one watches it, it may be irrelevant,' says Elizabeth Richter of WTTW in Chicago, in a crisp formulation that is related, but not identical, to one of the most significant themes in this collection, one expressed in the final chapter ('Towards a New Ethical Environment for public service broadcasting') as the challenge of 'reinserting the public into the broadcasting system...'

This essay by Prof. Marc Raboy of the University of Montreal includes a case study of regulatory intervention in Canada on behalf of the public interest and argues that regulation is essential to the health of broadcasting in a democracy. It is an eloquent argument on behalf of the public regarded not as clients, customers or columns of statistics, but as citizens whose public service environment includes the media of mass communication. Raboy's conclusion is that '...the provision of mechanisms for meaningful [public] participation at the points of decision-making, remains the greatest challenge to the process of media *democratization*.'

It's a view that resonates with the conviction expressed by Timothy Leggatt. Reviewing fifteen years of British research, he notes that 'there is ample evidence that television viewers can readily make judgements of quality and identify what they mean by them; they can certainly distinguish their judgements of quality from their expressions of interest or enjoyment...' He concludes, 'What cannot be too strongly urged on any country seeking to assess quality - if action is to follow from its assessment - is that public opinion should be constantly tested'.

The editor is to be commended for creating a ground of interest on which broadcasting professionals, media researchers, legislators and the public can meet and find both stimulus and correctives for their debates on the future of broadcasting.

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Communication Concepts 6: *Agenda-Setting*

James W Dearing and Everett M Rogers, London: Sage, 1996.

ISBN 0-7619-0562-6 (ISBN 0-7619-0563-4 pbk)

Reviewed by: *David Quin*

In the beginning was the agenda, and the agenda was with the powerful. But it was not until 1972 that McCombs and Shaw came up with a sufficiently catchy name for the game. And thus began the continuing attempt to provide empirical, quantitative evidence for what Walter Lippmann drew attention to in 1922 and David Hume in 1758.

In Agenda-Setting, James W Dearing (Associate Professor of Communication at Michigan State University) and Everett M Rogers (Professor and Chair, Department of Communications and Journalism at the University of New Mexico) categorise, draw distinctions, and summarise research into the media, public and policy agendas. They bring order to a field that needed it.

Judged on internal criteria, the book is 'on the whole' a good summary of agenda-setting research. Judged on external criteria, it is seriously inadequate.

The main theme of the book, the authors point out, is the "broadening of scholarly research in recent years from hierarchy studies to include investigations of a single issue (or a small interacting number of issues), either studied over time in a sociological approach or studied experimentally in a psychological approach". (p88) They conclude with a brief critique of agenda-setting studies, suggest topics for future examination and call for more multi-method research to increase the validity of conclusions and allow study of new aspects of agenda-setting.

There are interesting examples of research, not least the authors' own study of why the AIDS issue did not get firmly on to the media agenda in the US until about 5,000 people had died from the disease. (One problem with social science research is the crudity of measurement; however, the authors' net was finely meshed enough to include the fact that coverage of AIDS by the *New York Times* was delayed because its key medical writer broke his leg.)

Other examples are banal. Illustrating how the policy agenda can influence the public agenda, the authors refer to a Canadian study which discovered: "People who had curbside recycling in their community (a public policy in place) and who had pro-environmental attitudes engaged in recycling behaviors. People who did not have curbside recycling in their community (no policy enacted), even those who had pro-environmental attitudes, tended not to recycle." (p75) The mountain of hard labour produces a mouse. Such research could itself be recycled.

Scientific paraphernalia and jargon can give the illusion that something important is being said when it is blindingly banal. As regards jargon, the book is described on the back cover as a "reader-friendly volume". The following passage indicates that the authors are, if not reader-hostile, reader-indifferent, unless the reader happens to be equally at home in barbarous jargon: "The introduction of experimentation marked another methodological move toward disaggregation in agenda-setting research, and

a focus on the micro-level behavior involved in the consequences of issue salience." (p63) Further on, "Derksen and Gartrell (1993) demonstrate the importance of conceptualizing and operationalizing recursivity in a study of the social context of recycling behavior in Canada." (p75)

Any activity can become an isolated game. Specialists especially risk setting up a screen of abstraction, euphemism and jargon between themselves and reality, looking at the cardiogram instead of the heart. But there is more going on in this book than specialist semi-detachment. Although the authors appear to be liberally concerned about bad things, they seem oddly insulated from the realities of power, from a world where Henry Kissinger can be awarded a peace prize.

They describe agenda-setting as "a process of social construction" –this in a country where a handful of corporations control the media, where, in the interests of balance, Tweedledum is allowed to debate an issue with Tweedledee. They appear to believe that the US is a healthily pluralist society where competing powers check and balance each other in all matters. They admit that the White House – along with the *NYT* and spectacular trigger events –plays "a dominant role in putting an issue on the US media agenda". 'Put on' is a quaint phrase to describe what the White House and its agents did to the media agenda during the Gulf War.

Addressing the question, "Does the public agenda influence the policy agenda?", the authors reply: "Research evidence is less strong." (p92). In a country where two-thirds of federal revenue goes to war, do we really need a ten-year quantitative study to answer that one? A *NYT* poll on the eve of the Gulf War showed that 56pc of Americans backed an international peace conference being set up, while 37pc did not. But President Bush was not reading the lips of the 56pc majority. When it comes to the crunch and it can get away with it, the White House *ignores* the public agenda. There's no great mystery about agenda-setting. And, insofar as power controls the media, the media are servile and mechanical.

In their conclusion, the authors suggest some questions for future research, such as: "What keeps an issue on the national agenda over a lengthy period of time?"; "Is the media agenda-setting process limited to news issues?"; and "How does one issue compete for salience with another issue?" I would suggest some additional topics. What is the role of advertisers in silencing the agenda of the poor, the old and the marginalised? What part is played in agenda-setting by new technology; by the high salaries of certain media stars; by television rules under which an in-depth interview lasts around 180 seconds; by internalised ideology, by indifference (which is the violence of the comfortable and complacent), by racism?

In the authors' critique of agenda-setting they examine research methods, but they do not 'critique' agenda-setting research itself. An attempt to reproduce the rigour and precision of science in an area of human nuance and complexity has its limits.

Imagine a substantial, multi-method study of agenda-setting during the Gulf War. It might not reveal anything we do not already suspect, although it would provide solid evidence to back up observation, intuition or common sense. But now imagine a book about the same topic written by a first-class journalist, historian, political scientist or communications expert, giving a rich, multi-dimensional account of the many factors involved in agenda-setting during the war: manipulation of news, censorship (by Iraq, of course – the West provided "reporting guidelines"), self-censorship, careerism, personality, broadcasting technology, Pentagon jargon, the portrayal of war as Nintendo game, the focus on dead cormorants instead of dead civilians, the role of a servile media and of spurious notions of journalistic objectivity leading to a TV commentary parade of so-called experts (retired colonels, a former CIA director, conservative thinktankers); the trivialisation and silencing of dissenting voices; the part played by an all-American NBC loyalist in preventing pool-passless Robert Fisk from playing his part in agenda-setting. Smart bombs and stupid journalists. Et cetera.

We do not need scientific methodologies to spotlight what was revealed by one journalist who, referring to Saddam Hussein, asked a US general: "How long is it going to take us to lick this guy?"

Another issue, therefore, for agenda-setting researchers to ask themselves is: what are the limitations of agenda-setting research? It introduces scientific criteria to a field

where unfounded opinion and prejudice can run riot, and it has come up with useful and occasionally fascinating evidence. But researchers should occasionally remind themselves of its limitations, particularly those of quantitative methods where these are inadequate. And some should also, from the point of view of the powerless, take a close look at the agenda of the powerful. Researchers who, like Dearing and Rogers, blind themselves to the pervasive, insidious workings of what Edmund Said has called "coercive orthodoxy" may illuminate certain issues in their detail, but their treatment of agenda-setting at the macro level will be skewed and superficial. A final question. Why do the authors fail to mention one prominent researcher into the manufacturing of consent? Why is Chomsky not on their agenda?

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News on a knife-edge: *Gemini journalism and a global agenda.*

Richard Bourne., London: University of Luton Press, 1996.
ISBN 1 86020 524 0

Reviewed by: *David Quinn*

News on a knife-edge by Richard Bourne (University of Luton Press, 1996) is also a book about agendas. Its sub-title is: *Gemini journalism and a global agenda*. It is a lively account of the London-based Gemini News Service which since 1967 has been trying to put on the agenda the kind of news which the news agencies of the West (or North) have excluded. It also happily includes a varied selection of stories published by Gemini.

The key person behind Gemini was Derek Ingram, formerly deputy editor of the London *Daily Mail*. He was passionate about the Commonwealth – not, as the author points out, as "just a fag-end of the British Empire" but as "a living, growing association" (p185) – and in the late 1960s Gemini was seen primarily as a Commonwealth news features agency.

By the late 1980s, however, it had developed into a world news service, though one of a unique kind. It sought to promote development in the Third World and used indigenous rather than parachute journalists.

The book portrays Gemini as a pioneer in recruiting indigenous journalists, reporting matters of interest to developing countries; in providing new types of journalism, and in the kind of specialist training it provided for journalists. And as well as reporting development and Commonwealth issues, it covered global trends and events in developing countries, as well as scientific, health, rural and environmental issues worldwide.

Ingram has objected to Gemini being categorised as a Third World or alternative news service. He wanted it to be regarded as a "mainstream source of copy", "to be seen by the big boys (*Toronto Star*, *Melbourne Herald*, *Straits Times* etc) as a bona fide news agency, small of course, but nevertheless a competitor to the big agencies". (p63)

Gemini was kept going on a shoe string and went through three major crises. It survived thanks to the commitment of its tiny staff as well as timely grants and, at times, the patience of creditors. In 1988, income from grants outstripped that from the sale of news features. The lack of cash in the London office no doubt ensured that staff did not become insulated from the realities of the Third World.

Given the increasing commercialisation of journalism, it is good to read about a news service driven by the idealism of those whom bottom-line hacks call bleeding hearts. And it is refreshing to read about journalists who do not regard news as an end in itself, who realise that there is a real world beyond the engulfing horizon of the cliché-world of self-absorbed journalism.

One example of the Gemini spirit is the Village Reporting project: Gemini obtained

finance for a scheme under which local reporters were paid for up to three months to live in a village. "More than 15 reporters in almost a dozen countries, ranging from India and Sri Lanka to Fiji and Lesotho, took part. Shyamala Nataraj, an Indian who spent two months in a village in Tamil Nadu, found it 'one of the most rewarding experiences I've ever had'." Apart from enjoying himself tremendously, he learned "much about my country and my people that I would have been totally blind to otherwise".

I know from my own experience the satisfaction of working for a journalistic operation, however shoe-string, that is led by people with extra-commercial commitment, so I will not echo the *Buenos Aires Herald* by describing Gemini's story as heroic. But it is, I think, relatively speaking, exemplary.

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